

Letter from Alexander Graham Bell to Annie M. Sullivan, April 2, 1903

388 April 2nd, 1903. Miss Annie Sullivan, 73 Dana Street, Cambridge, Mass. Dear Miss Sullivan:

I have read Helen's book with interest and delight, and have written to Mr. Macey congratulating him upon the part he has played in the production of the book. Unfortunately I am not sure of his address, and directed my letter to 6 Everett Hall, Cambridge, Mass., which was the address he gave me more than a year ago. If this is not correct please let him know that I have sent a letter to him at that address and he can hunt it up in the Post Office.

Why in all the world did you not tell us about those letters to Mrs. Hopkins, when we were preparing the Volta Bureau souvenirs; they are of the greatest value and importance, and contain internal evidence of the fact that you were entirely wrong when you gave us the idea that you proceeded without method in the education of Helen, and only acted on the spur of the moment, in everything you did. These letters to Mrs. Hopkins will become a standard, the principles that guided you in the early education of Helen are of the greatest importance to all teachers. They are TRUE and the way in which you carried them out shows — what I have all along recognized that Helen's progress was as much due to her teacher as to herself, and that your personality 2 389 and the admirable methods you pursued were integral ingredients of Helen's progress.

Now what I want to impress upon you is this: — That it is your duty to use your brilliant abilities as a teacher FOR THE BENEFIT OF OTHER TEACHERS.

I don't want to bother you with this thought too much at the present time; but, as soon as Helen has finished with Radcliffe College, I AM GOING FOR YOU.

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You must be placed in a position to impress your ideas upon other teachers. YOU MUST TRAIN TEACHERS so that the deaf as a whole may get the benefit of your instruction. Please keep this matter in mind. What you have done with Helen can surely be done with some of the deaf who are not blind. It is a fallacy to suppose that blindness is an ADVANTAGE to a deaf child — it is a fallacy to suppose that language can be intuitively acquired. Once we realize that language is acquired by imitation — it becomes obvious that language comes from without, not from within. The most startling demonstration of this fact was contained in the Frost King incident. We all do what Helen did. Our most original compositions are composed exclusively of expressions derived from others. The fact that the language presented to Helen was in the early days, so largely taken from books, has enabled us in many cases to trace the origin of her expressions but they are none the less original with Helen for all that. 3 390 We do the very same thing. Our forms of expression are copied — verbatim et literatim — in our earlier years from the expressions of others which we have heard in childhood. It is difficult for us to trace the origin of our expressions because the language addressed to us in infancy has been given by word of mouth, and not permanently recorded in books so that investigators — being unable to examine printed records of the language addressed to us in childhood — are unable to charge us with plagiarism. We are all of us however, nevertheless unconscious plagiarists, especially in childhood. As we grow older and read books the language we absorb through the eye, unconsciously affects our style. Books however do not affect our language to the same extent that they affected Helen because our habits of language, have already been formed before we come to read books. Nevertheless our style IS affected, hence the very great importance of selecting with care, the kinds of books to be read by children.

It is ridiculous to expect that a deaf child — or a hearing child for that matter — shall talk or write good English, unless good English has been PREVIOUSLY presented to the child in spoken or written form — and in sufficient quantity to impress Good English expressions upon his mind. Then — and then only will he spontaneously use good English in expressing his own thoughts. This thought lies at the ROOT of the instruction of the

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deaf. Once we clearly grasp this conception we can see the 4 391 cause of the poor English used by the deaf. It makes one sad to see how this principle is persistently violated in all of our schools for the deaf — but you have pointed out the remedy and have clearly demonstrated the truth of your position by an illustrious example.

My best wishes go with you and Helen, and in conclusion allow me to repeat — what I began with — **YOU MUST TRAIN TEACHERS.**

Yours sincerely, Alexander Graham Bell P. S. Dr. Bell asked me to say that he wanted to write Miss Helen, but he was unexpectedly called away, and will write later. Private Secretary.